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Disinformation: causes, consequences, and solutions. Findings from quantitative and qualitative studies on fake news perception in Poland

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THREATPIE 

Aims

- To examine a level of disinformation exposure among the Polish media users.
- To study a disinformation perception among the Polish media users.
- To recognize similarities and differences in disinformation perception across generations.a
- To recognize media users' opinions on causes, sources, & consequences of disinformation.
- To collect citizens' ideas on solutions to threats related to disinformation.

Theoretical background

- Political Information Environment (van Aelst et al., 2017): a supply side and a demand side.
- A growing anxiety that citizens are rather *misinformed* and base their political views on false or misleading information they believe to be true (Kuklinski et al., 2000; Rojecki and Meraz, 2016).
- Disinformation is seen as particularly widespread among partisans, and specifically in countries characterized by (a) a polarization of news supply, often rooted in polarized conflict and late democratization, (b) increased levels of populism, (c) low trust, (d) opinionated journalism, and (e) larger advertising markets rendering them more attractive to disseminators of disinformation with commercial interests (cf. Lazer et al., 2018; Nyhan and Reifler, 2010).

Research questions

(RQ1) According to citizens, what are the main causes of spreading false information in the media?

(RQ2) In citizens' view, what would be the consequences of disinformation?

(RQ3) What solutions to a spread of false information are offered by regular citizens?

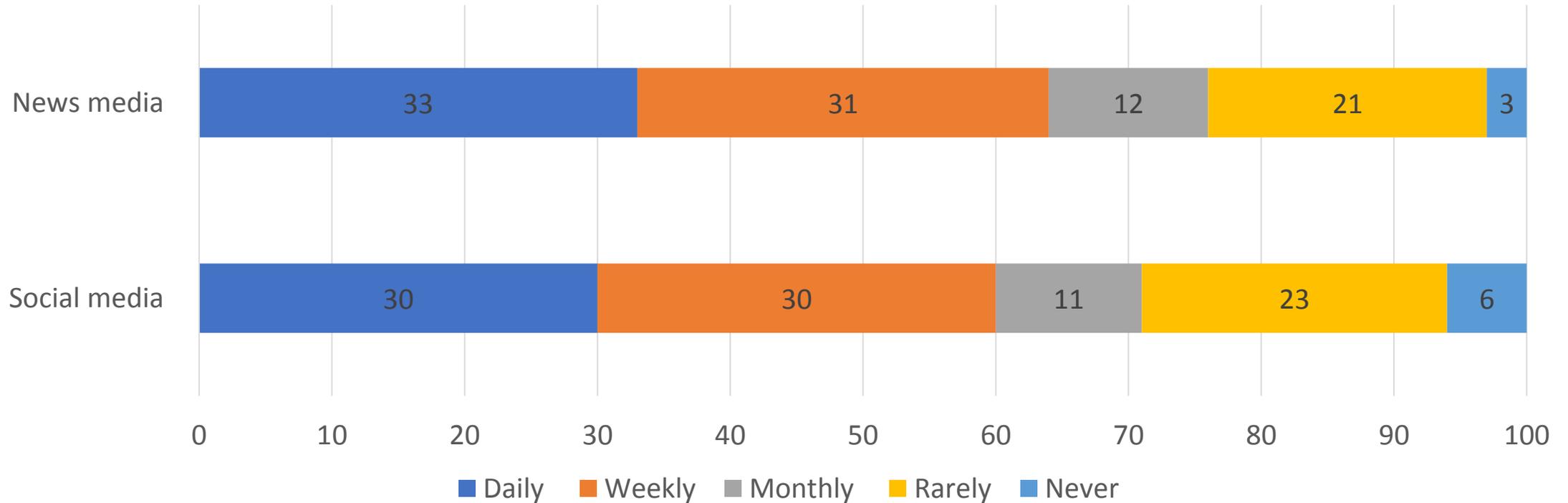
(RQ4) What are similarities and differences in these matters across generations?

Methods

- Quantitative study: a survey
 - A representative sample of the Polish population (18+)
 - N= 1,696
 - Conducted by DYNATA for the Network of Political Communication Scholars (NEPOCS) in winter 2019/2020.
- Qualitative study: focus groups
 - The youngest adults (18-25 years old, n=6) and the eldest cohort (55+, n=7) of the media users.
 - Conducted under the framework of the project „THREATPIE: *The Threats and Potentials of a Changing Political Information Environment activities*”.

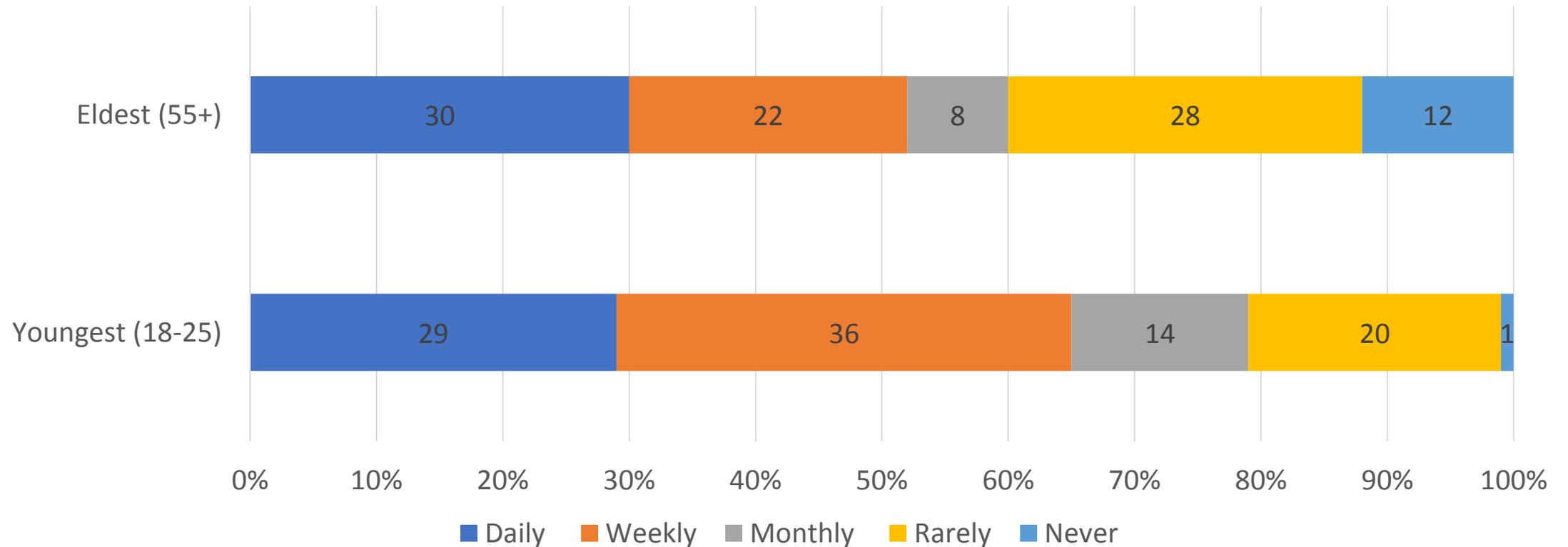
Political false news exposure (total sample, N=1,696)

How often do you come across political news or information that you suspect is false? On...

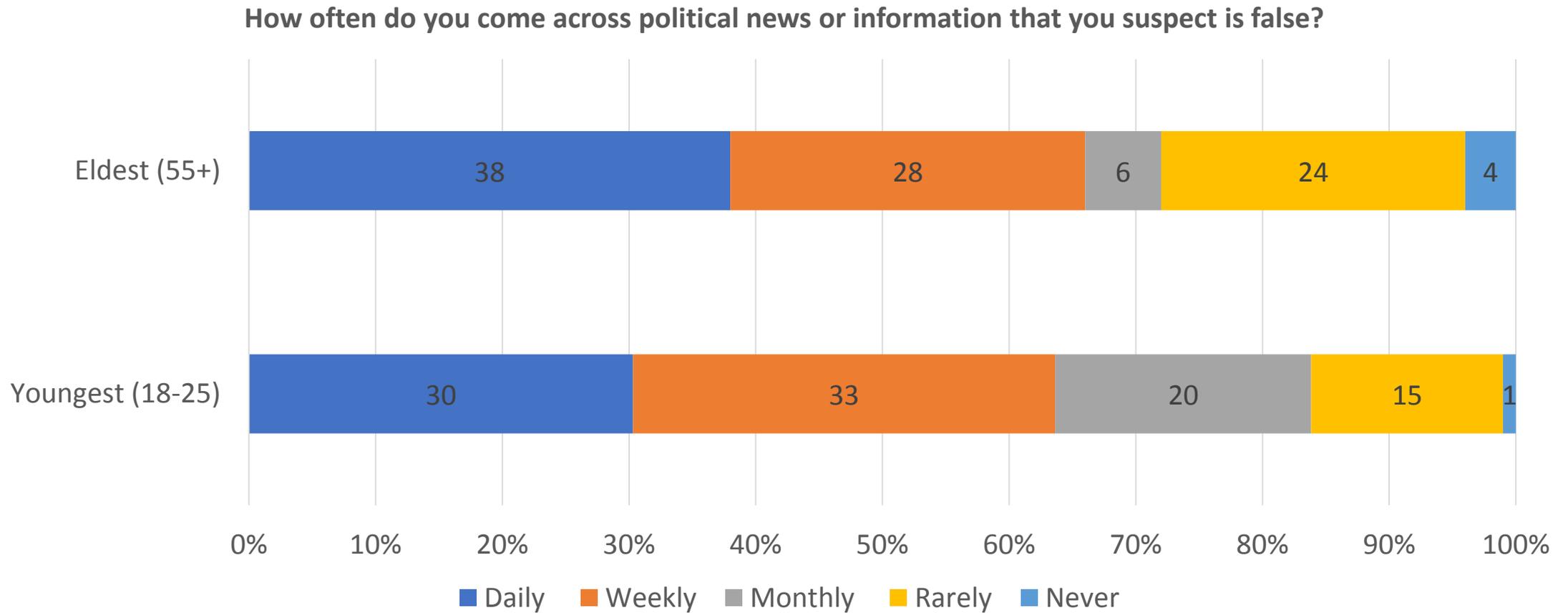


Political false news exposure on **social media** across generations

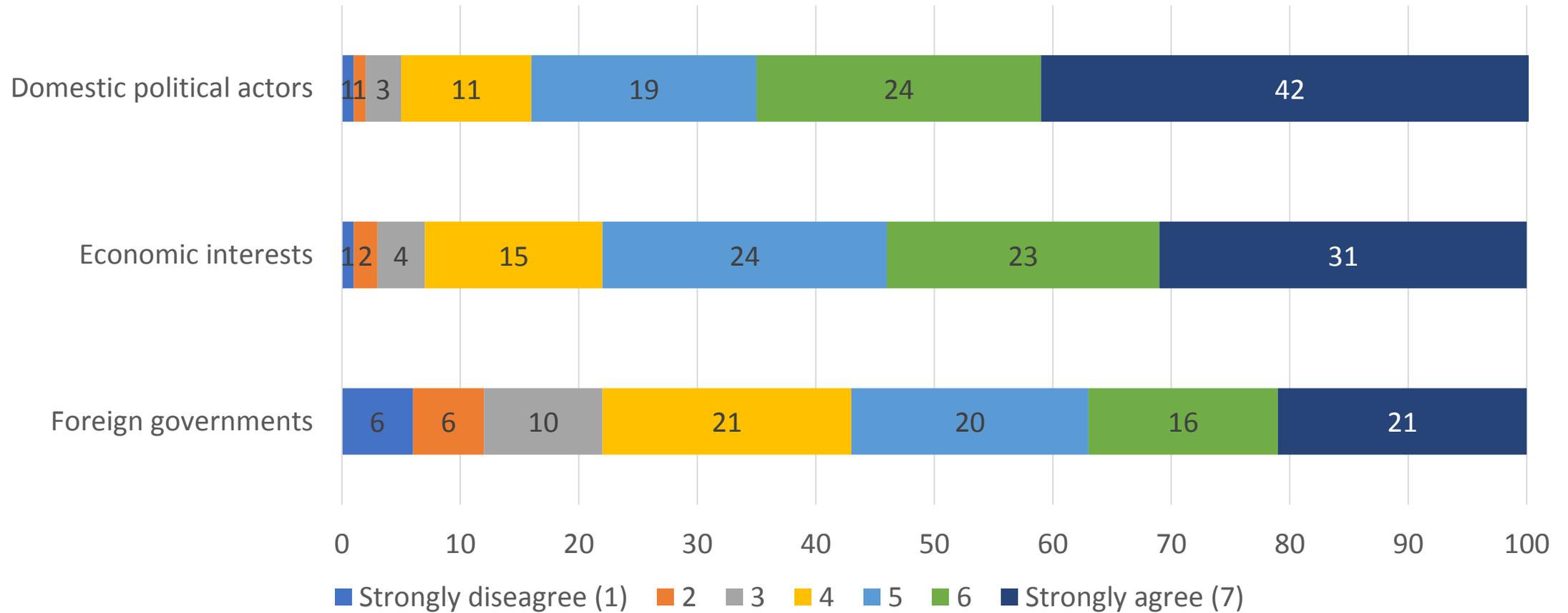
How often do you come across political news or information that you suspect is false?



Political false news exposure on **news media** across generations



Causes/sources of disinformation



Focus groups: causes

- Internet provided a favorable environment for spreading disinformation (18-25)
 - *Social media are the precursor to disinformation.* (PLC12, 18-25)
- Political and economic causes (55+)
 - *We live in a time of information and information technology warfare, both at a national and international level.* (PLC05, 55+)
 - *What is more, we are dealing with the commercialization of media messages.* (PLC05, 55+)

Focus groups: consequences

- A problem of strengthening opinions and attitudes among online/social media users who stay in a filter bubble built around some false information.
- A devaluation of facts and authorities and a decrease of trust in any source of information; disinformation leads to questioning everything and a derogation of facts:

We all live in a post-truth era. The truth does not matter. Emotions that accompany us during various events are the most important thing.

(PLC07; 55+)

Focus groups: solutions

- Actions undertaken by social media platforms and their users,
- Actions undertaken by fact-checking organizations,
- Use of artificial intelligence technology,
- Individual self-control and self-protection,
- Legal regulations and legal responsibility of the social media platform,
- Civic society responsibility and interventions,
- Education.

Individual self-control and self-protection

- *It is not possible to check every article. A man cannot do it, and computerized control systems are not 100% effective. We must compose our diet ourselves. We have to know how to use the media. (PLC10; 18-25)*

Online platforms *versus* legal regulations

- *Perhaps the responsibility should be taken by the platform that provides the opportunity to share information. I cannot tell how that might look. I do not know if any steps should be taken by the government or NGOs. (PLC11, 18-25)*
- *I do not know when freedom of the press ends. The only option is to draw legal consequences. It is hard to talk about platform responsibility. We must wait for enough trials indicating that spreading certain slogans have legal consequences. (PLC13; 18-25)*

Education

- *Throughout my entire education, I have not been taught how to consume media. I was lucky that my parents were knowledgeable. Nevertheless, there are individuals whose parents do not have this knowledge. Such persons will not be prepared by the schools. I am not surprised that there might be a problem. I am afraid we will not be able to do something about it. (PLC12; 18-25)*
- *As early as possible. Young people use the internet, so this kind of solution will come in handy for them. Learning gets harder as we get older. I hope that such a course would be practical and pragmatic. It is not about learning by heart; it is about learning how to avoid false information. (PLC12; 18-25)*

Conclusions

- Around one third of Polish media users reported a (political) false information exposure on a regular (daily) bases.
- Low level of trust in media: both social media and news media are almost equally suspected of spreading false information.
- According to Polish repondents, disinformation is mostly spread in the interest of domestic political actors and because some people or companies make money on it.
- Eldest media users: causes; youngst adult media users: solutions; both groups: consequences.